

ARTICLE APPEARED
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11 May 1985

Why the 'Post' Is After Buchanan's Scalp

The Washington *Post*, perhaps the most powerful liberal journal in the country, whose articles are picked up worldwide, is obviously frightened. Executive Editor Ben Bradlee and Co. have been having nightmares, and what's haunting them these days is a feisty, strong-willed conservative, Patrick J. Buchanan.

The *Post* has been in a state of near-panic ever since Buchanan came on board in early February as director of communications under White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan. Horrified, it has meticulously detailed his ascendancy, and now considers him the second most powerful White House adviser.

What especially rattles Bradlee's *Post* is that Buchanan being Buchanan is always battling to let Reagan be Reagan. Unlike the Baker-Deaver team of the first term, Buchanan is someone who eagerly yearns to have Ronald Reagan implement the conservative agenda, and every hint that he's accruing influence and clout sends cold shivers down the backs of the *Post*'s major editors.

Buchanan's power is already considerable. He heads the speech-writing team, and managed to persuade Regan to let Linda Chavez, a fighting neoconservative, succeed Faith Whittlesey as director of the public liaison office. Former staff director of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, Chavez has more than 30-odd slots under her and reports directly to Buchanan. Moreover, he is not only on very good terms with Regan, but he frequently gets to see the President himself, who listens closely whenever Buchanan speaks.

"In the weeks after he got to the White House," the well-informed Fred Barnes writes in *The New Republic*, "Buchanan had a string of triumphs. He urged Reagan to veto a farm bailout bill, which Reagan did. He said Reagan should ignore the well-publicized shoving match involving a Korean dissident, and Reagan did that. He made sure that Reagan's speeches had a tougher conservative edge, especially on the subject

of Central America. He managed this not by inserting fiery passages and right-wing buzzwords, but merely by passing the speech writer's texts on to Reagan without bowdlerizing them, as his predecessors had done."

It was Buchanan, for instance, who eagerly blessed the speech in which the President — Clint Eastwood style — threatened Congress to "make my day" by trying to force a tax hike.

Bradlee's *Post* can't abide such bald conservatism. It wants "detente," the death of "Star Wars," higher taxes, an end of aid to the Contras, etc. And it now appears to be mobilizing an array of *Post* hit-men to try to destroy the President's most powerful conservative chess piece.

Bradlee's *Post* has trotted out Lou Cannon, Reagan's unofficial biographer, to be the chief enforcer against Buchanan, but other *Post* reporters are also on the prowl. Not a week seems to have gone by when Cannon hasn't shelled the President's communications director several times with heavy artillery fire.

Despite his nominal prestige, however, Cannon has no credibility as an impartial observer, long having discarded any semblance of objectivity. Even before Buchanan had had a chance to settle in his job, Cannon was using him for target practice. The word is out, moreover, that he has vowed to "get" Buchanan, not only because he finds his ideology odious but because Buchanan has had the temerity not to return Cannon's phone calls. (Imagine that! Not returning the phone calls of a prominent *Post* hatchetman who has

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vowed to do you in. Tut, tut, Pat, you should go to the gallows quietly.)

David Hoffman, a fellow *Post* reporter, incidentally, has acknowledged to others that part of Cannon's ire stems from Buchanan's failure to return his calls.

To force Buchanan to knuckle under to the *Post*, Cannon is not above misrepresenting the facts. The April 27 *Post* carried a front-page Cannon story with the headline: "Buchanan Seen Hurting President."

Astonishingly, Cannon then tried, without precisely saying so, to pin the loss of aid to the Contras—which failed in the House by a two-vote margin—on Buchanan, even though the White House flatly rejected Buchanan's strategy! Blaming Buchanan for this defeat would seem to take quite a bit of ingenuity, and although Cannon wasn't up to it, he gave it his best shot.

In truth, many political experts believe that Buchanan's key argument to the White House—that the President could secure a victory only by going on national television—was right on target, and would have provided the President more than the necessary margin of votes to win in the House.

Nevertheless, Cannon, obviously obtaining leaks from aides to National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane (who opposed the TV speech), suggested that Buchanan's combative advice was proving damaging to the President's Latin American policy.

Buchanan's recommended strategy, Cannon wrote derisively, put him into direct conflict with McFarlane. "First," said Cannon, "Buchanan pushed for a nationally televised speech on the issue last Sunday. When this approach was rejected because Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole [R.-Kan.] and other White House aides wanted a speech on the budget instead, Buchanan kept pushing.

"On Saturday, Reagan gave a radio speech on the Nicaraguan issue, saying that failure to give aid to the rebels would be 'a shameful surrender!' On Sunday, Buchanan conferred with Central In-

telligence Agency Director William J. Casey and other Administration conservatives, and with Sen. Jesse Helms [R.-N.C.], then tried unsuccessfully to persuade Reagan to give a speech the following night describing aid to the rebels as essential to U.S. security."

In retrospect, that's precisely what Reagan should have done. It was the failure to follow Buchanan's strong recommendation that resulted in the calamitous setback to the Contra aid program, the key to the Administration's Central American policy.

As one State Department official lamented about the President's failure to go on TV: "I can't believe the President couldn't have persuaded at least two of the 14 Republicans who opposed him on the Michel resolution to switch with a major Reagan speech, and it almost certainly would have brought along a number of fence-sitting Democrats as well." Furthermore, a victory on the Contra vote would probably have paved the way for additional presidential success on both foreign and domestic issues. It surely would have helped to drown out the media play on Bitburg.

In short, conservatives, you've seen the pattern before. The media lust to weigh in heavily against any conservative that gets close to the President—Ed Meese, Richard Allen, Jeane Kirkpatrick, etc.—and now they've set their sights on Buchanan, the *Post* in particular. Will the media bag him?

Probably not. Buchanan is tough and shrewd, and he showed his mettle when he singlehandedly took on the Senate Watergate panel more than a decade ago and made monkeys out of his inquisitors. Nevertheless, if Bradlee's vengeful *Post* fails to get him, it won't be for lack of trying.

Meanwhile, don't be alarmed or distressed when you see Buchanan under fire in the *Post*. You can immediately assume it is an attack launched in spite and wholly lacking in integrity. And you can also assume that Buchanan wouldn't be under such an assault unless he were doing something right.